

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT  
NORTH ADAMS**

**INFORMANT: JOHN A. BOULGER  
INTERVIEWER: ROBERT GABRIELSKY  
DATE: FEBRUARY 2, 1989  
PLACE: WESTERN GATEWAY HERITAGE STATE PARK**

**R = ROBERT  
J = JOHN**

**SG-NA-T008**

Interview begins with informant in mid sentence:

R: ...Gabrielsky on February 2nd, 1989, in my office at the Western Gateway Heritage State Park in North Adams, Massachusetts, interviewing Jack Boulger, president of the office workers union at Sprague Electric Company, for the Shifting Gears Project, The Changing Meaning of Work in Massachusetts, the oral history aspect of the Shifting Gears Project.

R: Where were your grandparents from?

J: My grandparents, that's a good question. My grandmother was from Canada. I believe my grandfather was too.

R: On both sides?

J: Yeah. Oh no, just on my mother's side. My grandparents on my father's side were from Ireland.

R: Uh huh. That's peculiar, because the name sounds french.

J: Yeah. The name is Irish. [R: Oh] Yeah, the name is Irish. I'm not sure that's (--) It used to be spelled O'B O L G E R. And when they came through immigration they dropped the O and somehow or other they added a U in the middle of the name. [R: Uh huh] So it got, it got mongrelized at immigration.

R: Do you remember your grandparents?

J: The only one that I remember and that I ever knew was my grandmother from, she was from Canada.

R: Uh huh. Do you from stories or anything, do you know what your grandparents did for a living?

J: Uh, yeah. My grandparents on my father's side were farmers and they came here during the potato famine, and they settle in southern Vermont, which was opened to homesteading at the time. And they lived their short lives out there. Worked themselves to death. [R: Uh huh] And uh, my grandmother on my mother's side, who was from Canada, up in the North Pacific Canadian area, [R: quite far] yup, was married to an individual who was lost or missing during World War I. And that was the end of that. Ended up with the Canadian Government having no record of him ever been in the military. And he was an individual that was decorated seven or eight times by the government and ended up with no record of him. So I never knew uh, the only one I ever knew was my grandmother on my mother's side. And she just past away a couple of years ago.

R: Uh huh. How about your parents? What did your parents do for a living?

J: My mother has been a waitress most of her life, where she'd retired now. And my father who past away about fifteen years ago worked in a mill.

R: What kind of mill?

J: Woolen Mill. [R: Uh huh] Strong Hewitt most of his life.

R: Where is that?

J: Uh, that was up in Clarksburg, just about ten or twelve miles north of here.

R: Uh, and what was his position?

J: He was a worker, a laborer.

R: Machine tech, or machine operator?

J: Yup, yup.

R: Um, so where did you grow up?

J: I grew up in Clarksburg, MA. which is again, six or seven miles north of here. And moved to the city when I was quite young. Fifth grade in fact. And lived in the city for all but the last eleven years.

R: In North Adams?

J: Yup, in North Adams.

R: Uh huh. Um, so you went to school here?

J: Yup, yup.

R: How far did you go in school?

J: How far did we have to walk?

R: How far, no, in terms of grades?

J: Oh, oh, oh, I'm sorry. Through the fourth year of high school.

R: Uh huh. [J: Yup] Do you go to church now, or did you ever go to church?

J: Yeah, I used to go a lot more frequently than I do now.

R: Uh huh. What is your affiliation?

J: We're catholic.

R: Uh huh. So you went through school through Drury High School?

J: Yup.

R: The old Drury?

J: Yeah.

R: When did you graduate?

J: 1953. [R: Uh huh] '52 it was actually, class of '52.

R: What was the first job you held?

J: Uh, the first full time job that I had was in Strong Hewitt Woolen Mill, which was where my father worked. I worked there um, all during my high school on the second shift.

R: While you were going to school you would go in at what? Three, four o'clock, or?

J: I would go in, the shift started, it was four to eleven. So I'd get out of school at two, or a few minutes thereafter and go home and get changed and walk to work.

R: How did you feel about that?

J: Well, it was okay. I needed to help. [R: Uh huh] My parents weren't in the best position that they could have been in. So they needed my help. And it was okay.

R: Um, [pauses] did that affect you scholastically at all do you think, or?

J: No I don't, I don't believe it did. I was a fellow who was born with a great love of the outdoors. And that's all I thought about is fishing, and hunting, and just being out and being by myself. I really didn't take much to crowds. So, and I don't think that I would have gone on to school (--)

R: [Laughing] The reason I'm laughing, it's ironical. I, I mean I'm scratching my head. I was a local union official. Not a president, I was secretary/treasurer of my union. It happened to be an IUE Local, for a couple of years. I just interviewed Ray Bass. And he said something very similar to what you said.

J: Oh yeah.

R: Just like, I'm not really a very social person. Frankly my first reaction is, how does someone who is not social become a union leader. I mean to me it's a contradiction, all right.

J: Yes it is. I think in order to uh, I don't have any problems socializing today. It's something that I had to learn to do, [R: you cultivated it] or adapt to, or even force myself to do it at the first of it. But when the unions first came here, or when they attempted to come here, there was nobody around that was willing to pick up the torch and lead the way. And I certainly didn't want to do it, because I wanted to be off [R: by yourself] into the woods somewhere by myself is right. [Laughs] But uh (--)

R: You got leadership thrust upon you.

J: Yeah, it uh, there was just no one else that needed to do it and I felt very strongly that it needed to be done. [R: Uh huh, uh huh] And uh, so I jumped in and did the best we could.

R: Uh huh. I think this is uh, fascinating. I'm learning a lot about this in terms of character, but it's not what I would have expected to find, which is what makes it interesting. [J: Laughs] It's always interesting when you find, you know, that's when you learn stuff, [J: Sure, sure] when it's something you never expect to find.

So you worked at this woolen mill through high school. And you say (--) I suppose uh, see it didn't affect you scholastically, I suppose then it also socially it didn't bother you. You weren't interested in going out for sports, or anything like that?

J: No. I really wasn't, I really wasn't. [R: Yeah, uh huh] In fact I kind of enjoyed (--) I used to have to walk, which was probably oh, maybe three and a half miles, three miles. And I used to (-)

R: Up the hill?

J: Yeah, walked through the woods and I used to hunt on the way in and walk on the way out at eleven o'clock.

R: And then you'd park your rifle in the locker, or?

J: No problem. [Laughs] No problem. In fact they asked me to shoot a few rats for them while I was there. [Laughs]

R: Well how long is hunting season? It's the middle of hunting season now, isn't it?

J: Well yeah, but everything that I'm interested in is over with. [R: Uh huh] So. I don't get to do it like I used to. [R: Uh huh] I save my vacations now. I take maybe two weeks a year to do my hunting and I prepare for that for fifty weeks a year.

R: Where do you go?

J: I hunt mostly in Vermont. I hunt in New York State and I hunt in Massachusetts. I hunt three states.

R: Around here, right around here?

J: Yeah, yeah, this is pretty good country right around here, these little hills that we have.

R: Umhm. Um, so when (--) How long did you stay there at the mill, at the woolen mill?

J: I was there until I graduated from high school. And then I ended up being the only one in the whole facility on the second shift and they finally laid me off.

R: What in the world did you do if you were the only one?

J: Well my job was (--)

R: A watchman?

J: No, I was preparing the wool that used to come in, it would come in in rough state if you will. And they used to wind it on to bobbins during the day. And then it was my job to stand it all up in a big oven and apply moisture to it and so on. That was my whole job.

R: No foreman there?

J: No, no.

R: Sounds like a great, sounds like a great job!

J: I used to read a lot. The factory manager was a real understanding guy. And in fact I talked to him. You know, I felt guilty about going into work and not really having anything. And it

seems like every four hours I would get a little, half an hour's worth of work, which they wanted to have done. And they were willing to have somebody there, but I talked to him several times about you know, getting laid off, because it (--) Bring in a book he said, bring in a book. So he had me bringing in a book. And I used to hunt it and I used to fish in the spring, in the summer, in the fall. You know, there was a pretty nice brook at that time that ran along in back of the mill. And I used to go out there and fish until it got dark. And then (--) So it was uh 9--)

R: Is there still fishing around here now?

J: Uh, very little around here. It's put and take. You know, they put them in in the morning and you catch them in the afternoons. So I don't much care for that.

R: Uh huh. Do you go fishing anywhere?

J: Yeah, I fish in New York State and in Vermont.

R: Did you ever do salt water fishing?

J: Uh, very very seldom do I go. I have been out a couple of times and enjoyed it. It's just that it's so far away. [R: Yeah, right, right] Major trip for us. So.

R: Sure. See, I grew up near the shore.

J: Yeah.

R: Um, okay. So you were working there and you ended up being the only person on this second shift, then what happens?

J: Well then I, finally they did away with the second shift and with a little piece of work that used to generate the work for me. So I got laid off there. I think it was very shortly after school was in my senior year. And then I went down, I went fishing for about six months. And then, and then I went down to Sprague and applied for a job. [R: Uh huh] So.

R: That was what year?

J: 1952.

R: And um, what job did you get? You went to Sprague. What job did you get at Sprague's?

J: I ended up working in the mail room as a mail boy for about a year and a half, two years. Then I moved on to the messenger room delivering boxes instead of envelopes kind of thing.

R: Were you willing to take any job they gave you? Or were you looking for a job in an office, or production, or did you have a particular goal in mind, or?

J: No, I was willing to take anything that they gave me.

R: Uh, so you worked in the mailroom? You were, I guess you were delivering, you brought, you delivered mail?

J: Yes, yup.

R: To executives and that sort of thing?

J: Yup., yup.

R: And how long did you do that?

J: Uh, for about two and a half years. And then maybe another year in the uh, what they call their stationary department, delivering stationary and (--)

R: Supplies.

J: Packages, supplies, yeah.

R: Right, to secretaries and uh (--)

J: Yup, yup. And uh, and then there was a job posted. And back then there was about 6,000 people working there I guess. There was a job posted that I thought had a little career path with it at least, in their product engineering department. And I signed for it. And there were about sixty other signers. So I didn't get it. And the boss interviewed me anyway. He said, "look, he says, I'm going to post another job and you can have it." And so I said, "jee, that's great!" So about four or five weeks later they posted another job as a specification writer. So I said, "jee, great!" So I signed for it. He called me up and uh, asked me whether I'd rather be a spec writer, or a draftsman. So I said, well. He recommended the specification writer, so I went with that one. And that was the start of a long, long career. There were about eighty signers on that one incidentally and he gave it to me.

R: So what does a specification writer do?

J: Well basically it gets more complex as time goes on naturally, as you get into the job. And it went up through the chairs, from a C, to a B, to an A, to a senior designer, to a product designer, to a design specialist. And you know, those are the chairs. What we do is we handle the orders that come into the company. When they're finally all cut and all ready to go, everybody knows what they want, they come in and the people in the specifications department have to determine whether we have the part. And if we didn't we need to make the part. [R: Uh huh] And if we're going to make the part, how are we going to make it to meet the requirements of the customer. Interpret blueprints.

R: Do these vary with different departments, or?

J: Uh, yeah, yeah.

R: I mean, Sprague's was a capacitor manufacturer, manufactured other things with you. I mean you just pointed out some of the things that I had in pictures and stuff. I know, as a matter of fact I have an associates degree in electronics and a capacitor can go for anything with a you know, micro, micro [unclear] [J: Oh yeah] to you know, some monster thing for power companies. And just in terms of physically making them, since they're so different physically, I can't imagine that being the same department, or that (--)

J: Oh no, they're all different. [R: Yeah] For most of my career with Sprague Electric I designed for thirty-seven different product types, which included some very tiny tiny little fellows, right up to very large capacitors that were so big they had to be mounted on railroad cars. [R: Uh huh] And uh, yeah, they're all, all different. Right now I'm working and I'm not involved in design at all. But right now I'm working on tiny tiny little tantalum pellets. And that is the, that's the guts of a tantalum capacitor. A little pellet that they grow.

R: Did you have any background in physics in high school, or anything like this?

J: Well as I got into the specifications rating I found that I needed to brush up a whole lot on my math and physics. I took physics and chemistry courses and a couple of electronic courses too, to uh, so that I'd understand what I was doing.

R: Right. Where did you take these courses?

J: Uh, a couple of them Sprague provided for us through their professional people.

R: And did they have a classroom on the (--)

J: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And a couple of them (--)

R: This is at Marshall Street?

J: Yes. Also at Brown Street. They had classes down there too, on capacitors and what to look for, and the danger (--). We got really good. [R: Umhm] There was nobody in this country that was any better than we were, [R: Yeah, yeah] as far as capacitor, you know.

R: It was the major (--). I mean I know in the fifties I was building you know, radios and amplifiers and stuff like that, [J: oh yeah, yeah] and you know, it was usually Sprague capacitors, you know.

J: Yeah, yeah. Well we got uh, when I say we I mean, I mean us guys that were designing and determining what should go where, got really good at it. [R: Uh huh, uh huh] And second to none. There was nobody in this country that could tell us the right thing to do, because we knew it, you know. We uh, [R: Uh huh] one (--). That was one of the good things about Sprague. We used to kid around and say, "learn while you earn", that kind of thing. [Cough] And it really was that way. The problem was you didn't earn very much. Your learning was a lot more advance I think, than the earning. [R: Laughs] So, but uh, I took several courses. And I think I



took one at North Adams State, [R: Uh huh] way back, a long time ago on radio. [R: Uh huh] So it was (--) Even, to get further into the job we used to get calls from out in the field for example. And they would say, "here's what we need and here's what we want to end up with. What can you do for a capacitor that would provide us with the power?" [R: Yeah] And you know, the space, taking in the consideration space limitations and weight limitations, and so on and so forth.

R: Break down the element.

J: We did an awful lot of work for the Atomic Energy Commission.

R: Uh huh. Now the NRC.

J: Yeah. We had uh, we had uh, mostly it was for [bendix], but we had some capacitors that were so high quality that it was unbelievable. Absolutely the finest in the world.

R: Really tight tolerances?

J: Oh everything was, everything was tight, and everything was (--) Just a superb capacitor. In fact they fired some down range in the nose of a missile. And when the missile came down everything was ruined except our capacitors, which used to look just like they came right out of the box. Unbelievable!

R: Uh, well it's quite interesting that you got that kind of education. Um, you started working where? At Brown Street?

J: No I started at Marshall Street. [R: Uh huh] I was at Marshall Street I guess for maybe three years. A little over three years. And then the specifications job came open and I had my choice of going down to Brown Street, or staying at Marshall Street and doing a drafting job. [Cough] So I took the uh, I took the Brown Street specification job.

R: What was the difference between Marshall Street and Brown Street? I mean as a place to work. You know, the sort of surrounding and the feeling of it?

J: Well I guess that speaking from my own personal experience, Brown Street was a branch plant, Marshall Street was corporate headquarters. [R: Uh huh] And everything was pretty straight laced there, or at least on the surface.

R: A lot of white shirts?

J: Yeah. Oh yeah. Yes. White shirts and ties. And Brown Street was, being a branch, was a little more relaxed, but also it provided an individual with more of an opportunity to grow than the Marshall Street complex did. Up there there was always some reason why you couldn't do this, or somebody to do it for you. Whereas on Brown Street if we, if we ran into a technical problem, we resolved that problem ourselves. And that provided I think, a lot more relaxed and a lot more learning atmosphere than was available at Marshall Street. At Marshall Street they

would have wanted, and this is not completely true, but at Marshall Street there were more professional people who they could rely on to get their answers for them. [Coughs]

R: Your title was a Specifications (--)

J: Specifications Writer C when I started, yeah.

R: Okay, right. Uh huh. Could you describe a typical day in this position?

J: Yeah. We worked, we used to work eight to five, an hour off for lunch. Fifteen minute breaks, one in the morning, one in the afternoon. And we used to work two nights a week. I'm not even sure which one it was now. It was, I think it was Tuesday and Thursday nights. We worked from six o'clock until nine o'clock, and we worked Saturday for five hours in the morning. That was a typical work week. And on a typical day we'd go in and probably glance through a newspaper. The orders were usually there from either first thing in the morning, or late the night before. And we'd go right to work on the orders and get them out.

R: What, in other words, what were you doing? Packing things, or what were your duties?

J: Oh no, no. This is designing.

R: Uh huh. Oh, you have an order to (--)

J: Yeah. We had bulletins with standard parts and if somebody (--) We'd get an order with a standard part, it was just a matter of putting the part number onto the order [R: I see] and then processing that into the scheduling department and the material control department.

R: Uh huh. But if it didn't exist then you'd have to (--)

J: If it didn't exist then we'd have to generate specifications [R: uh huh] based on whatever their requirements were. And uh, the specification actually, it was not only a plan, or a guide for the factory, but it also was, provided building materials for material orders and parts and so on.

R: This was always a capacitor, or would it be a circuit, or?

J: No, we don't, we never made circuits. We only made the capacitors. [R: Uh huh] So um. And we had (--) So hundreds of different types of capacitors.

R: Uh huh. So you would get, you would get an order asking for something and then if it didn't exist you would (--) Developing specifications, this would be, this would require some mathematics, or a lot of mathematics, or?

J: Oh yeah, all math. [R: Yeah] All math. Worked an awful lot with volumes. [R: Uh huh] Inside volumes and presses. And we went through all kinds of different kinds of rolling. We used to be very much concerned about air spaces between the layers of dielectric. [R: Uh huh] And we had to compensate for that in our designs. And we continuously strived for techniques

of rolling which would provide for zero air space, or at least what we thought was zero air space.

R: Right. Did you make models, or um (--)

J: Um, if we got into something that was a little different, that happened quite often, we used to write specifications for prototype. And we used to have way back when I first started, we had a little group working there whose job it was, was to build the first parts. Maybe sample, on a sample basis, or an engineering sample if it was something that we had never gotten into before. For example, if we had to design something in such a small package with so much capability, we might want to roll up a couple of prototype units and actually build them. Take them down, impregnate them and get them built, and try them out.

R: Would you do that in your department?

J: No, no, but we would generate the paper work that would (--) And then it would go into the factory [R: right] and production workers would do the rolling and put everything together for us.

R: What your saying, for particular specs and things like that, did you ever, you had to design the product. Did you ever have to design the machinery to make the product? That there was this new kind of spec, or anything?

J: No, but I never got into that, but there were some people there whose jobs, the methods department for example. [R: Right] Their job was to keep us right up on the cutting edge. [R: Umhm, umhm] Yeah, there was forever new equipment. And every time we got new equipment, it meant new design theories and concepts. It was just an evolution, over thirty years of applying a few basics really. And incorporating a few changes to the few basics. [Unclear] for a long long time.

R: Um, when were you married?

J: I was married twice. I don't even remember the first time I was married thank God, and I don't remember the first time I was divorced. But I married a girl who was not very understanding, and objected to me spending any time in the woods kind of thing. And I was married nineteen years ago the second time. [R: Uh huh] And uh, that one, that's a good one. That one took.

R: Uh huh. Is your wife from around here?

J: She's from Germany.

R: Uh huh. How did you meet her?

J: I met her in Sprague's. She came to work at Brown Street. She came to this country when she was about seven or eight years old, right after the war. And uh, she came to work at Sprague's and that's where I met her.

R: What did she do at Sprague?

J: Uh, she was in scheduling. [R: Uh huh] She did the scheduling for some of the stuff that I did the designing for. [R: Uh huh] And she worked in their material control department, clerical type work. And then she got into accounts payable department. And she really likes doing that kind of work. And she went right up. They made her a section leader in about 1984. And uh, no '83, and then they closed the place down. So [R: Uh huh] she went to work in the, up in a Bennington Corporation, [Beejer ?] heading up their accounts payable department for them. And Sprague called her back when they moved down into the [tantalum ?] and asked if she'd go back and be the accounts payable manager, which she, that was the job that was closest to her job so she did. And she'd still there.

R: Um, when did you first become involved with the union?

J: I think probably in the mid sixties. There was an Independent Union in there. [R: Umhm] And uh, it seemed (--) I remember after, after my first year on the job at Sprague Electric probably going back to about '54, I thought I was working pretty hard and I asked for a raise. I certainly wasn't making much money. And uh, I didn't get a raise anyway. So I went to the Independent Union, which was in place, to find out what you had to do around here to be eligible for a raise. And they I guess put some pressure on the company and I was give and three cent raise, and told that I was at the top of anywhere I could go in that company. And uh, the union supported that too. So probably that was my first, my first dealings with the union way back in 1954 is when I was thinking about it. I became a department rep I guess right after that. But I didn't really get involved until about 1965. And I again became department rep and this was still for the Independent Union. And I saw some things going on that I just couldn't believe. So I started doing some reading and I started reading some of the laws. And I got a hold of some labor papers. And I said, "my God, you know, you don't really know how bad something is until you find out how it should be, or how it is in other places. And I began to find out. So uh, I then began to talk with outside unions, IUE in fact, in 1966. And uh, in 1966 I organized the implant committee, with the purpose of voting to join the IUE and to dump the Independent Union. And at that time we had 840 office workers. And that didn't work out. It culminated in and [NLRB?] election, which we lost by six votes. So it was very very close. And I felt that we should keep going what we had going and take another shot at it as soon as we could.

That's when Walter Wood came in and let the IUE into existence in Local 200 in North Adams. So I worked very closely with Walter, who I had a tremendous amount of respect for. And meantime the American Federation of Technical Engineers had told us, in fact they told us there was a run-off election. And in 1967 they said that if I needed any help, any information, whatever I needed to get in touch with them and they would provide it for us.

R: Run-off election where?

J: Uh, at Sprague. There was (--)

R: Between who? What was the bargaining angle? [Repeats question] What was the bargaining angle?

J: Well the first, the Independent Union was there. [R: Uh huh] And we attempted to bring in the IUE in 1967. [R: Right] And we lost that election. [R: Umhm] And one of the people that were on the scene was a fellow by the name of Eddy Netzel from down in Pittsfield. But [coughs] they weren't involved in that election at all. Once we petitioned the board for another election in 1969, the board opened it up and asked for all likely (--)

R: The regional board [few words unclear]?

J: Representative from (--)

R: They intervened at that point. [J: Yeah, yeah] Uh huh.

J: And uh, meanwhile (--)

R: [You ever been?] You were for, you were initially then for the AFTE?

J: No. I was uh, I was still a very strong supporter of the IUE. [R: Umhm] I had met a couple of guys that I considered just absolutely powerful, overpowering individuals. And Earl Riley was one of them from the Boston area. [R: Yeah] And a guy by the name of Jim Compton out of the international headquarters. And just absolutely, of course they had a lawyer too that, the guy just was just so abso (--)

R: [Unclear] I think I know who you mean.

J: Abrams? [R: Maybe] I don't know, I'm getting old.

R: It's just when [Carey?] was still in president I guess.

J: Yeah. Anyway he was, just absolutely powerful people. And they had the resources. They were big and they had the smarts [few words unclear]. So I was, even when the AFTE was in there talking to us, I was still a very strong believer of the IUE and (--)

R: So there was a second election and then there was a run-off? Was that it?

J: Yeah. During the second election, this was in 1969 now, never came to an election, because the implant committee which I created to bring in the IUE was very much interested in listening what the AFTE was saying. And they had a fellow from Pittsfield who was up here quite often. And bringing everybody out to dinner and talking about this and that and the other thing.

R: This is interesting to me, because you're talking about an organization, this implant committee, which you created. You're position is pro IUE, but you're saying the committee you created was moving towards the AFTE before you did.

J: Yeah. There's a reason for that.

R: Was there appointment in this?

J: No there wasn't.

R: It was just the general sentiment?

J: Yeah. What was happening was that the AFTE had told us that if you need anything let us know, because we don't want to just wash out hands of you and leave you here. And the IUE said the same thing. Difference was the IUE didn't follow up. They left us hanging there.

R: They weren't as hungry probably. [Laughs]

J: Well yeah, there's a lot of ways to look at it, but they, they didn't do a thing. So, and I didn't really, I had no expertise in [R: sure] any of these areas, but I could see, I could see the movement solidifying internally. Not only within the committee, but by this time you know, it was, we knew or had a pretty good idea who were in favor of having an international union, or being represented by an international union and who wasn't. And we really knew who to work at. And finally it got to the point where I figured, well okay, there's going to be an election. Something is going to happen. I wasn't sure what at that point in time. But I knew that things for right for a change. So I called a couple of IUE guys out of their Washington offices. And I said, "look, you know you said you'd be in here and there hasn't been one of you around here." "In fact you kind of took a position that the people in the factory voted for the IUE and your office didn't." "So the hell with you and we're going to get everything we can get for" (--) I guess they figured they really glorified [phone rings] the B&M workers in their contract and forget about us. And you know, teach us a lesson kind of thing. Anyway I told them that you'd better get into town here, because (--) You better get an organizer in here, because there's something happening and I can't stop it. And I haven't tried to stop it. And I may join with it, because it's rolling. [R: Uh huh] And nothing happened. Nothing happened. They passed my letter around from office to office apparently, to interpret what I had said and it was very clear. And anyway, there was a petition to the board and a move to affiliate with the AFTE from within the old Independent Union. [R: Uh huh] And that's the way that we had finally gotten into the International, [few words unclear].

R: So that wasn't, that wasn't your move initially. That came (--) Where, where were you? Did you have a position in the Independent Union at the time? Or did you, were you on the executive board?

J: Yeah, I was a member. I had no voice on the board, but I was elected member of a negotiating committee. [R: Uh huh] And that put me in pretty much the thick of everything that was going on.

R: Were you the person who was leading this then, inside the Independent Union?

J: No, no. Um, (--)

R: Who was that?

J: That was a fellow who is dead now, by the name of Ronny Durant. And Ronny, who was the (--)

R: He later became a personnel?

J: No, no. He became the president of the first AFTE Local. [R: Uh huh] What happened was that, I shouldn't really say this. You know, this is really the inside of what happened, but Ronny was an individual who thought the company should treat him a lot better position wise and they did. And he used his position with the old Independent Union. He was the chairman of the grievance committee, [Coughs] which ran the old Independent Union. The president was a figure head. [R: Uh huh] And uh, all of a sudden along came the next fellow that you have just heard of, a fellow by the name of Diodarti. And he took the presidency. He asked Ronny Durant, he said, "I'm Bob Diodarti and myself got on the Independent Union negotiating committee through an election, a membership election." And Bob got interested in the union movement. And I was a little more fired by what was going on, but my motives were a little more, a little deeper than Bob Diodarti's. Anyway he talked to Ron Durant and said that he was going to run for an office and if Ron wanted to continue being the chairman of the grievance committee, that Bob would run for the presidency. Well Bob simply looked at the by-laws of the old Independent Union. And it said that the president is the chief officer of the union and all departments shall report to him. [R: Laughs] And so Bob ran and took the office and then he took all of the authority and responsibility away from Durant, who had had it for a long long time. And Ron felt very bad about that. And while we were in the process of negotiating a contract, he was in the process of negotiating a better job for himself. And the company of course, you know, it was so obvious. I'm sure that they just used him. They had no intention of providing him with a better job. And anyway, that's how I got involved. Those two (--) Diodarti is the fellow that ended up supporting the Independent Union in the 1967 IUE election. Okay, and by that time he had taken control of the Independent Union.

R: What exactly is, in the hayday of your Local here, what was the extent of the bargaining unit. Not just you know, how many members did you have, but what defined membership?

J: We, we represented all office and clerical personnel. Office, clerical and technical personnel, including clerks, secretaries, steno clerks, payroll clerks, time study clerks, information service people, computer operators, schedulers, material controllers, specification writers, draftsman, company chauffeurs, receptionists, telephone operators, marketing secretaries, cost analysis people. The nucleus of our bargaining unit was the strength of the company. [R: Yeah] We represented everything that made it go.

R: I'm curious if you know anything about, or have opinions about it, how the old (--) I know this is way before your time.

SIDE ONE ENDS

SIDE TWO BEGINS

Begins with Interviewer in mid-sentence:

R: The stories about the history, the history of the Independent Office Workers Union before you were part of it, what do you think, or what did you hear about why it got started? Why was it separate from the ICW to begin with. I mean it's sort of, you know, it makes me (--) Uh, I can understand for example, you know, very often when they'll have elections they'll try to fraction out office workers from a bargaining unit because they're afraid they're going to vote against the union. That's a typical point of view in an election. I can understand that, but you know, given the fact that that wasn't the case, it wasn't the case going back at least to the late thirties, what, why were there separate bargaining (--) How did the union get started to begin with and be, why was the bargaining unit separate in the early days from the production?

J: I have no idea how the production and maintenance union was conceived. I don't know how that started or why. And I can only speculate about the office and technical unit. You know, I've been there for a long time and I've heard a lot of stories. And the one that I think is probably correct is that the company, there already was a P&M Unit. [R: Umhm] And I think that the company felt that they could do things a lot better if there was a union in place. And I think that(--) I wouldn't want to have to prove it, but I'm absolutely, I don't just think, I'm absolutely convinced that the company created the office and technical union. I know that by-laws was written by the, were written by the company's lawyers. And I'm aware of a lot of things that happened that showed too much of a relationship between, between the two. I think the company just felt that they'd be better off if there was, even if it was only in name, a union in place. [R: Uh huh] And I'm sure, as I say, I'm sure that they generated, or created the union.

R: Um, being (--) When did you actually uh (--) You were a (--) A representative I guess is something like a shop steward, or something like that, in the Independent Union. [R: Yeah, yeah] When then (--) You were instrumental, if not the only one, you were instrumental in bringing the AFTE in. When, when did you become the president of the Local, or how, what was your path to that position?

J: Okay. Well, [phone rings] the affiliation finally took place in 1969, we held an election shortly after that. At that point I was still there through my negotiating committee position. And we held an election after that. And I elevated my position to the grievance committee. And after the strike the fellow who, Ronny Durant, who was displaced, became the president of the uh, who was displaced in the Independent Union, became the president of the AFTE Local. It was through Ron in fact that the AFTE kept itself alive. They were bringing him out to dinner and so on and so forth. [R: Uh huh] And they were keeping it on a weekly basis over a period of almost a year. So when Ron finally decided it was time to become part of an international union, he was already sold on the AFTE. And the other guys had banged him around a little bit and you know, he didn't care to go that way. So he was put in the place as president, the first president. And then we had the strike. And then they took him out and put in a gentleman by the name of Ed [Marklin?] for a couple of years. And Ed was a fellow who was as honest as the day is long. Absolutely an honest individual. Very upright and very forthright and very honest, but Ed didn't know the first thing about a contract, or just wouldn't (--) Ed was the kind that he, Ed worked on



two jobs all of his life. Didn't have enough time to get involved in some of the things he should have been getting involved in. He should have put himself into a learning posture. And even though I don't agree you should learn from the highest position in the union, [both laugh] that's what he should have done, because I liked Ed and I respected him because of his honesty. And I certainly would have anything, absolutely anything to help Ed and help him run things. You know, I really didn't want anything to do with it. Well I found myself in the position where the company is calling me. And if there was anything technical, or if there was anything that was related to the contract, or contract language, or interpretation, or application of interpretation. And they just kept calling me and calling me and calling me. Finally I said, "look, you know, I'm only, I'm one of the four grievance committee people and you should be talking with our president." And the company said, "we refuse, absolutely refuse to talk with him." "He doesn't understand what's happening, he doesn't understand what's going on." "We need somebody that does and we're going to talk with you." And I brought this to the committee and yeah, they said, "okay," you know. So I ended up for the last year of Ed's presidency [R: few words unclear] yeah, running the local and then I ended up (--) Ed refused, well I guess he did run, but he didn't make a very good showing. You know, when somebody is there and doesn't do a very good job, it's very very obvious. And uh, so Ed was displaced. It was 1972 when I became (--)

R: What, in your union what's the relationship between the executive committee and the bargaining committee. Is it, [J: coughs] are they the same thing, or?

J: Yeah. One of the things that we changed over from the old International Union where they used to just pick somebody to go up and bargain out of the, off the floor of the membership, you know, at a meeting. [R: Yeah] Hey, you wanted to (--) Come on, you know. And one of the things that we changed was to say, you know, we want, we want to send the very best people that we've got in to talk with the company. [R: Uh huh] And we certainly don't want to send anybody in there who the company is going to circumvent on every issue. [R: Uh huh] So there were some of us that worked very hard to find out what was happening and how to go about doing things the right way, you know. [R: Uh huh] So we, yeah, we said we'll, the executive committee will be the negotiating committee. And the executive committee has all powers. I mean our contract, [phone rings] we gave the president an awful lot of power. I wrote the by-laws. And you know, or I was part of the committee that wrote the by-laws. And we gave the president of the Local, for expedience I guess more than anything, an awful lot of authority where he could do a lot of things that a lot of union presidents can't do on his own hook.

R: And the president is functioning like a chief steward [few words unclear].

J: We (--) Yeah. Yes, yeah. I've, right now I have to function as a chief steward, because I'm the only one left. Me and one other fellow with any grievance experience [R: Uh huh] for example. We developed, we had a very very long and hard strike and created an awful lot of enemies. So one of the things that I thought that we had better do was start to (--) And I was never involved in any of that. I was always in the background if you will. And when I became the president I told the company that I wouldn't lie to them, and I wouldn't lie to them to protect somebody who was lying. And if I knew something, they had privy to any information that I had. I would treat them with respect and I expected the same back from them. And we developed over the years a rapport with the company that was just you know, it was absolutely

phenomenal. They would tell me what was going on and they would even sometimes suggest alternatives to what was going on. And you know, I always had to option to study what we were looking at. To sit on it and think about it and try different ways. So we kind of developed that rapor between the grievance committee and the president of the union and the company, which kind of excluded our representatives. And that was always, we call our reps, our representatives are stewards, shop stewards. [R: Uh huh, sure] We called them representatives for some reason or other. [R: Uh huh] But they were (--)

R: So they really didn't have much to do in terms of grievance purposes.

J: No. They were, they were really excluded from the whole process. Things didn't go to grievances. We ironed out some of the stickiest messes without ever going through the grievance procedures.

R: Did this create any kind of factualism, or were these people just as happy that that didn't happen, or what?

J: I don't think that uh, I don't really think our membership knows what we did over the years. [R: Uh huh] I say that because (--)

R: Well presumably these representatives would know, right? I mean if they're, it's sort of by staff that way, you know, that they were filing grievances. That's there job.

J: They might (--). Yeah, yeah. But what they would do is uh, if there was a problem they would come to us and then we'd try to work the problem out before it went to (--). We'd go, we'd have (--)

R: Before it went to a third step [unclear].

J: We'd have a member of our executive board go right in on the first step, or even before it went to the first step, [R: right] and discuss the situation, mostly fact finding, looking for what the real truth was. [Coughs] And most of the times we ended up compromising one way or another. But I don't think anybody ever got hurt as a result of us doing that. And I think that we walked away with some winnings and victories that were just unbelievable by doing it that way. While we were doing it this way the IUE was in there hammer and nail if you will.

R: More adversarial.

J: They were, the company used to call me up and I'd go up and sit down and they'd tell me how bad they were treated by the IUE, you know. I said, "well you don't have to worry about that with me."

R: This was when, when Wood was president, or after?

J: This is after, really after Walter was president. [R: Uh huh] Because Walter tried (--). Walter, I think he saw the light too. I'm sure we both did. That everything was so adversary that

we could go no where. [R: Uh huh] So I think that he was using the soft approach too.

R: After the strike.

J: After the strike, yeah. [R: Uh huh] And uh (--)

R: How did that feel personally? You said you made a lot of enemies and stuff like that. I know that, I felt one of the difficult things for me when I was, I was in production in a auto parts plant. Actually it was a storage battery plant that I worked in. [J: Umhm] And uh, I know that it was a very, it would be a very difficult feeling to be, like file a grievance against my foreman. For the very simple reason that even if it was something that I just was [makes sound] driving me up a wall, this is a guy I had to work with everyday, you know. [J: Yeah] You know, I don't want to create that kind of animosity and yet I lived (--) The time I was doing this I lived in an area where the people who worked in the plant were very dispersed over a radius of twenty miles, or something like this. And one of the things that really strikes me about North Adams is that everybody knows everybody else. [J: Yup, yup] And how did that, how did that feel after the strike, or during, or before the strike? What kind of emotions were developed. I mean in terms of personally, you relationships and stuff?

J: Well yeah. There were, there was (--) It was a violent strike. We ended up at the Department of Labor with Jay Curtis Counts, resolving the problem, you know. And so it was a very serious thing. We only had about six thousand people involved. And you know, Counts didn't get, he didn't get involved in that kind of thing. So it was a very very violent time.

R: Were these mostly (--) The violence, was this mostly from production workers, or your membership, or from the management, or outside people? Where was the violence?

J: I don't really (--) I don't know where it came from. I know there was, there was a lot of outside help. There were people that showed up and introduced themselves. The nicest people in the world. You know, you got a problem with that lousy company, we're going to help you kind of thing.

R: Were these union people, or AFtE, or IUE?

J: Oh no. No, no. These were people I've never seen before. We got some help from Williams College and from North Adams State. [R: Uh huh, students] Students. We got help from God I don't know where.

R: It's like a picket line. You had a union office and stuff?

J: Yup, we maintained an office. So anyway, when I finally got in there, there was just, there was so much hatred and everybody had been polarized you know, obviously there was a majority of people who wanted the International Unions in there. And that's a pretty good base to start working from when you've already got a majority, but I felt that there was, the need was to unpolarize the whole bargaining unit. And just to get things back on to a friendlier atmosphere. I felt that it would be very difficult for us to go forward in any way when we had about half of

the unit who was really bitter over some of the things that had happened. So. And that's part of the reason why we developed the grievance technique that we did. [R: Umhm] Always having the ability to reduce it to writing in the process, or through the steps of the procedure and into arbitration. Always having that probably made it easier for us to use the procedure, the unwritten procedure that we had developed. In that if we knew someone was having problems, we felt very strongly, as did our membership, that we should, rather than go after the individual that was creating the problems, solve the problem. And I think that using that attitude, I think that we were able to develop a very strong rapport with the company. And I think that it swayed more of our people every time. I don't know whether it's just office workers or not, but almost every complaint that we ever listened to starts out like, I don't want to make waves kind of thing. [R: Laughs] And that's really what our people wanted. They didn't want us to go in and kick the walls down. We used (--) You know, once in awhile for affect we used to kick the walls down, but didn't need to. [R: Uh huh] Didn't need to uh (--)

R: There seemed to be (--) You talk about this sort of adversarial thing [few words unclear] just judging (--) You know, I had just seen the pictures of the strike, several pictures of the strike. There's a folder full of pictures of the strike with the transcript. [J: Umhm] And one of the things that struck was actually several pictures of you and Wood and the IAM fellow together. And at one end you talk about an adversarial relation, on the other hand one of the things that that sort of symbolized for me is a kind of cooperation between these three [J: Oh yeah] bargaining units. [J: Yes, absolutely] Is that uh, is that something that continued, or was that at a peak? Was it at a peak at that moment, or?

J: No. I think that Walter went on to be president for a couple of more years. And then I was president. [R: Yeah, till '74] Yeah. And I think that Walter and I, no there was never any adversarial feelings between the unions, or between, at least between the hierarchy in the unions [R: Uh huh] with any other union. No, in fact Walter got me involved in several things and contributed to my ongoing education in a lot of ways. [R: Umhm] In the IAM, although we really didn't have an awful lot in common with them, we maintained very strong rapport after going through what we did, you know. [R: Yeah] No, I uh (--)

R: Did you all settle together, all three of you?

J: Yeah. All three of us went to Washington, to the Department of Labor. All three unions sat in the same room. And Jim Compton, who was the pension expert for the IUE was the, he was leading the negotiation for all of the unions. [R: Uh huh] We were all represented there and we had picked him to, to uh, to speak for us if you will. [R: uh huh] You know you just can't have everybody speaking all at once. [R: Right] And uh, there were several areas that were the same. Our needs were the same and we said we'd, you know, we'll let Jim do the talking for us. And if there is any little minor details that we need to wrap up, we can do that, but there's no sense in tying the whole committee up on listening you know, what we've got to say. [R: Right] So there was no, there was no hard feelings between any of the unions on an executive level anyway. [R: Umhm] You know I still, to this day I have tremendous respect for the IUE and their capabilities. Our international union is a lot smaller. And I'd like to think that we have to use their heads a little more to make up for the difference. [Chuckles] But uh (--)

R: You're sort of qualified in terms of the talking about the hierarchy. You think that there's differences in terms of the membership, or are you suggesting?

J: I don't really think so. [R: Uh huh] I don't think so. You know I don't really get a chance to talk with membership of the IUE. Although a lot of my relatives out there. And I have a lot of lifetime friends out there, but I don't get involved with them on discussing matters that are related to the union.

R: What kind of (--) Going back to the, to the independent union and then to the AFT also, what kind of internal life did it have? I mean did it uh (--) When you started did the people go to membership meetings? You know, how well attended were they? Were there other activities besides membership meetings. And you know, what sort of activities were there? What did people do? Basically, was it, did it have (--) Aside from being kind of a service organization and bargaining agent for its membership, did it have any other kind of life, and what was that?

J: No. The independent union was pretty straight forward. It was there, and it was there, and that was it. It just wasn't involved in any community activities. It wasn't involved in any charitable organizations that didn't lend their expertise to the community if you will, in terms of some of the charities (--)

R: To do something like a dance, or a picnic, or something like that.

J: No. They had a union banquet. They used to collect about five thousand dollars in dues a year and they spent five thousand dollars on a union banquet, which they would invite all of their members and all the company executives. And in fact I was in attendance of a union meeting at one time, a combination union meeting, contractual vote union banquet all at one time. And when the contract came up to vote I'll never forget it, because [R: everybody was drunk {chuckles}] everybody was drunk, everybody was having a grand time. R.C. Sprague, Sr. was sitting there.

R: For the, for awards on the contract? [Laughs]

J: Absolutely, this was the independent union now.

R: That's a violation of labor law.

J: Yes it is! [R: Laughs] And I can (--) I'll never forget when they came to vote on a three cent raise. The company lawyer, his name was Flood, held both hands up. And the damn guy that was doing the counting counted him twice for acceptance.

R: But he, he was the lawyer from Arnold Print Works.

J: Uh, yeah, maybe. Yup. Yes he was. That goes way back into history. [R: Yeah] But that's the kind of, that's the kind of a deal it is. When the AFTE got in there I felt that we should probably from the greedy position, I thought we should become aligned with the United Way for example. You know, became a director of the United Way and I became on several of their

committees. [R: Umhm] We had a lot of people who were hurting, because they had been out on strike for ten weeks. And if there was a way to help them through the United Way, we wanted to know about it. So we, we got involved in some community activities and some training seminars. We contribute to most of the charitable organizations. We try to provide our expertise. I was on the Board of Trustees of the North Ad(--). I still am. Although not active, I was on the Board of Trustees of the North Adams Hospital. President of the Credit Union, of the employees Credit Union. [R: Unclear] Yeah. I got involved on a lot of things, six nights a week. [R: Yeah] And uh, it was just kind of, and I felt it had to be done. We had to turn that corner and we had to know what was going on. And we had to be a part of the mainstream if we're going to properly represent our people. And that's what we did. We got involved in a little bit of everything. And uh, that's (--)

R: Was this stressful? I mean cut from time in the woods?

J: Oh yeah, there was no more time in the woods. I'm talking six nights a week.

R: Yeah.

J: Probably four half days a week and six nights a week. And uh, we got involved in some political campaigns on a local level. Did all of the things that I felt we should. We developed a strong rapport with the international and uh 9--)

R: Was there any kind of a cooperation with other local unions that were not Sprague locals?

J: I always have supported any union that let's us know they need support. [R: Uh huh] You know, I think that that has to be universal or it don't work. [R: Uh huh] I also went in and became an officer of the Northeast Council of the AFTE. And I've been there for oh the last twelve years I guess. I'm now the president of that council, which is a council of locals from the New England area and New York.

R: It's a little above and beyond the call of duty. I mean in terms of what needs to be done. I get the feeling that there's some attraction in this work for you.

J: No. I think that when I decide to do something I want it to be done right. [R: Uh huh] And in fact, you know, I think I did go over-board, because I wanted to be aware of everything and I was involved in everything. And that in itself is not good. That can create problems. I'm not aware that it ever did that I wasn't able to get out of, you know. [R: Yeah] Certain (--). Like the committee of representatives now, one of our traditional problems has always been that they come to us with the problem and uh, we look at the problem. Now it was our policy to include that fellow at the first level in resolving our problems, and we didn't always do that. [R: Right] So we would have to always go back and apologize [R: Uh huh] and say, "look how it worked out," you know, kind of thing. [Coughs] And I am very very proud of the way that everything did work out as far as resolving problems. I've been able to, we've been able to move the Sprague Electric Company over ground that I don't think that they care to travel over. And it's been historical.

R: What were the issues of the 1970 strike, or more broadly what are the kind of general issues that you feel?

J: The primary issues for the general public and rank and file was wages. It was, Sprague was a very low paid industry. For those of us that were involved in internal committees and in trying to create a better work life, we were looking at things like grievance procedures. And with the independent union we had a nine step grievance procedure with, in the final step, the tenth step was (--) That's nine steps internally and the tenth step was with federal mediation. Either state or federal mediation, not binding to either party. So those of us that were in committee were looking for, you know, you get locked into something like that [R: Right] you're talking about two and a half years to get (--) We were looking for something that would provide a measure of justice swiftly before we forgot what we were looking for. We wanted arbitration. We didn't want, we didn't want anybody to uh, be able to turn us down when we knew we were right. Unless it was you know, it was a third party, then we could accept that. There was only one other issue now that the people in the committees wanted and that was, that was a union shop. We felt that because of the lessons that we had learned with the independent union, where everybody could join, vote (--)

R: You had an agency shop for, or just a working shop?

J: It was, it was an open shop. We ended up with an agency shop, but we wanted a union shop, or a form of a union shop. And with the independent union everybody used to join up one week and then come down and vote and then drop out. And they'd stay out for the next two or three years and then they'd come back in. So we needed to put an end to that, because, or the committee felt that we needed to put an end to that. And so we wanted a form of a union shop. And I think that was the four primary objects that we had set up for ourselves. There was a lot of other little areas that [R: sure] were cosmetic if you will, but we felt that in order to move forward and do anything at all that those were the areas that needed to be greatly enhanced.

R: There's something I don't quite understand though. If the primary beef of the membership was wages, and one of your primary considerations was an expedience grievance procedure, what are typical grievances? I mean what is it that is being grieved?

J: Oh my God!

R: Typically, but more (--) I mean I'm not asking for statistical analysis, but based on your knowledge of it, what kind of grievances do you tend to come up with?

J: Okay. Um, job bidding grievances, promotion grievances, wage grievances. When I said that you know, our primary object was wages all right, but we added to wages and with membership approval and said, these are the other things that we need. So when we went to Washington we had a list of ten items that we, that was a must. And I think we came back with about six of them, including wages and the agency shop and a grievance procedure. And we didn't get arbitration at that point, but that was one of the things that we had held up for.

R: Well, I'd like you to answer this question both from your own point of view and what you

think might be the point of view of your membership. What do you think of working conditions at Sprague and what do you think that your membership would think?

J: Right now?

R: Yeah, right now and in the 60's and 70's?

J: In the 60's and 70's I think that although people weren't living in ecstasy I think that they were reasonably happy. I know I've had a lot of people come up to me and say, "we just" (--) This is in the last two years, and say, "we just didn't know how well off we were," kind of thing. I think that based on the problems that we looked at, that the membership was reasonably satisfied. There were still some who carried the grudge over from the strike and from some of the things that happened during the strike, but I think generally they felt that (--) There were so many things going on inside that uh, social things and uh, people I think will always complain. And God knows that's exactly what I want them to do from my point of view. [R: Yeah, yeah] But I think that they were, from my experience I would say they were fairly satisfied.

Uh, from my point of view, as we got into the late 70's, I was pretty happy with myself that first off, over how far we had gotten the company to move over a short period of time. When we affiliated we were knocking off 97 cents an hour. [R: Umhm] And ten years later our average was about over \$9.00 an hour. [R: Uh huh] And you know, our committee, we were very happy about that. And we were very happy about, about the fact that we had framed a contract that uh, and spend enough time doing it and enough thought doing it, that applied to almost every problem that we had. It did apply to every problem that we had over the next fifteen years. So I was pretty happy with what we had done. I was pretty happy with the fact that we had been able to move a corporate giant like the Sprague Electric Company into listening to us and into achieving some measure of fairness just because we were saying that this is the way it should be. And they actually did that. They moved towards being a lot more liberal company. The more we dealt with them the better off things seemed to get.

R: That leads me right to my next question. Let me phrase it before you begin to answer it. Broadly speaking it's what do you think of the bosses at Sprague and what do you think. But if there is distinction I would like you to break it down between first line supervision and top management. Just what do you think of first line supervision and what do you think of top management, and is there a distinction?

J: Oh there certainly was uh, there certainly was a very definite distinction. One of the things that we learned to do in the middle seventies was to, we felt that the first line management was just not adequately prepared to deal with someone who is in the know.

R: They never read the contract, you know that. Wood would never read the contract.

J: No, and I'm not so sure that they would understand its interpretation if they did, but one of the things that we did and one of the things that made us happy that we were able to get rid of, or not have to deal with this whole bottom and mid-management layer. I didn't personally. I dealt with the (--)



R: Did you bump it right to a third step, or just [unclear] to make it a grievance?

J: Oh no. I would talk, present a problem. Well even beyond personnel if it was, if it was a very serious situation. I can't think of any situations off hand, but if it were a situation that was very serious I might talk to the chairman of the Board of Directors, [R: Uh huh] Mr. Welch, [unclear] Welch about a problem. And he might call (--)

R: His door was opened?

J: Yes. Yes. Those were the doors that we were (--) When I said we open doors we didn't bother opening doors at the bottom, [R: Uh huh] we opened the very top. And it wasn't unusual for him to pick up the phone and direct personnel how to handle a certain situation, [R: Uh huh] because you know, based on our conversation with him.

R: So you felt top management was enlightened? Do you recall? Was there labor policies, or?

J: I'm not, I felt, I still feel that they were so much (--) I was furious with that company when I was a young fellow, because of the things they did. But later I learned and come to accept the fact that we let them do it. You know, and I said, I would say to myself, "would I pay a guy ten dollars an hour if he was willing to work for a buck." And the answer was, "I'm not going to give him ten." Well you know, I came to learn that there was a level of management there that was second to none in this nation. They were absolutely brilliant. And the proof of the pudding was in the tasting, because they ran a super company. 18% growth a year and it was a fantastic company. And they demonstrated fantastic growth over the years. And uh, I think that one of the things I've learned, I've never said it before, but one of the things that I learned was that that company had people in it on its upper levels who were absolutely as intelligent as anybody in the world, and who absolutely knew the difference between right and wrong. And it was just that we fell short of our marks, because we just didn't insist that the right thing always be done.

R: Okay, okay. When and why does it turn around? I mean I thought, we've interviewed a lot of people on this project who have taken a position that it was the strike and union [unclear] that convinced the company to leave. On the other hand I mean I think that you're a very articulate representative of a union point of view, but you frankly seem to, seem to uh, you articulate the same kind of point of view about the company that a lot of people were hostile to the union. [J: Umhm] So, I mean what I'm getting at is basically this. Is that you know, at some point your membership begins to decline. When and why does this happen?

J: One of the things, going way way back to the independent unions, now we had 840 office workers in there. In fact, for every job they had about 2 1/2 people. [R: Chuckles] And their wages reflected that.

R: Not very high. You're saying originally it was very inefficient.

J: Very low wages. Very absolutely inefficient. And uh, (--)

R: When is this you're talking about? In the forties?

J: Oh this is going right up through 1965, 1967, in that period of time. Uh, not very interesting and low paid. You just couldn't work there and earn a living. The company policy was to let you work all kinds of overtime you know, to make your wage, or to make enough to live. So.

R: So they cut, basically what you're saying is that the decline in your membership to begin with has to do with basically the company trimming fat.

J: Yeah. Making things more realistic even.

R: Yeah, but you're down to fifty-five members, that's a lot of fact.

J: Okay. Well we went from, when we were an independent union we went from 840 people, we went down to about 600 office workers. And in 1970 there came some tough times for Sprague Electric, 70, 71, even 72.

R: Why was that?

J: Business, for business reasons. They uh (--)

R: You don't think the strike had anything to do with it?

J: Uh, I'm aware that there were some changes made because of the strike and I think that some of the top management moved a couple of lines out of North Adams because of the strike, but I really don't, I really don't relate the major reductions in work force to the strike. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm not making the right connection, but I don't really (--) I have a very difficult time relating reduction in personnel to the strike. Very, very difficult. I know that R.C. Sprague, Sr. was a very proud man and he was very upset when we struck him. And he was very upset when (--) He made a very bad mistake during the strike. And I talked to him during that period of time.

R: How was that to talk to him (--)

TAPE I ENDS

TAPE II BEGINS

SG-NA-T009

TAPE BEGINS WITH INTERVIEW IN MID-SENTENCE:

R: And uh, your interaction with him upon the strike, his feelings about the strike. And um, while you were on strike was it at all stressful for you to meet with him, or how was that, what was that like?

J: Well our, my meetings with the company were very casual during, during the strike. Maybe just in a corner somewhere while I was getting ready to take my place on the picket line kind of a situation. But, but the company never expected there to be a strike. And they were completely and totally unprepared to handle a strike, any kind of a work stoppage. And we tried to convince them that the people were serious and they would vote for a strike if it came to that. And the company said, "we don't believe you." [R: Uh huh] And I can remember like it was yesterday talking to a fellow by the name of John Weiner who was vice president, corporate industrial relations. In coming away from a conversation with him and going to a union and at that meeting we were going to take a strike vote. Everybody knew it. The company had made their final offer, but we had said to him, and he had said to us, "if you can get a strike vote from those people, if they vote to strike then you come back and we'll talk some more." Well I didn't want a strike. And I needed to be able to talk to the company.

R: So you didn't make the motion?

J: To uh (--)

R: For a strike?

J: No. No, that came from (--)

R: That came from the floor.

J: From somewhere. I don't even remember. I was, I was just a member of the negotiating committee then. [R: Uh huh] I know we had a big fight about how we were going to vote. Big fight. Going to be a secret ballot, or show of hands. And finally the secret ballot won out. And there was a secret ballot vote and in deed it was for a strike. And the one thing I know is that I counted the ballots and I know that it was a very solid strike which is contrary to a lot of things that the company's propaganda has pointed out over the years. [R: Uh huh] And there was a very strong strike vote. In those days 65% was a strong strike vote in those days. All we needed was a majority plus one. [R: Right] Today you want 99 plus one, you know. [R: Right, right] In fact, then we had a very strong, I don't remember exactly what the numbers are, but somewhere we've got that documentation. And we called, we called and said, "we better sit down." And John [Weiner?] says, "well apparently we've got a full blown strike on our hands." And that's when it started. He certainly did, because we went from there, we had signs prepared and we went from that meeting to the picket line. And we starting picketing at midnight. And we had some pretty powerful picket lines. [R: Uh huh] They were very well attended, very well runned picket lines. The thing that I found out and I don't know whether, I don't what I would have done if I had known this, but the company was absolutely unprepared to handle a strike. They had no idea what to do next, what to do first. They didn't know absolutely what they should do. They were in a quandary. And anybody that says anything different doesn't know

what they were talking about, because Sprague Electric proceeded to loose all of the money that they had made over the years in the one year following that strike, because they had completely [enisleated?] their customers. They thought that it was better to sit down and put the management in and actual producing capacitors, which were all rejects because they were just not capable of that chore. [R: Uh huh] And they took all of their marketing people, all of their sales people, and instead of having them answer the phone and say, you know, we've got a tough strike and it's going to be another five or six weeks before we can talk about deliveries. They didn't do that. They took all of our marketing people and sales people and they put them on the production line, rolling rejects. By the thousands and by the hundreds of thousands they made rejects. And they shipped them out, because they didn't know whether they were good or bad, most of them. And they shipped them out all over the country and all over the world and they all fizzled. Everything they made went bad. And they lost everything they ever had. They lost their shirts. And they took it for ten weeks. You know, if they had taken it for ten more weeks, we wouldn't have had a place to go back to. But the fact is that that company was absolutely and totally unprepared and had no idea to go about how to handle the strike. And they blew the whole thing. That's when, that's what caused in my position, in my opinion, that put them in such a poor position in 1971 and 1972 when the country was in kind of a tough situation, that put Sprague in a position where it didn't have anything to fall back on. There was nothing there. And there was nothing there, because they had, they had misreacted to that strike. Didn't know what to do. And I'm absolutely convinced that that's when things started going down hill.

R: When did Sprague's growth begin? You know, growth where it has plants outside of North Adams. You know, that's really before you came, right?

J: Yeah. Um, they had really had plants all over the place. They had, even during my stay there I'd seen them start other facilities. [R: Umhm] Uh (--)

R: Was there ever any discussion on your part, or maybe you with Wood, or you know, maybe Wood thought about? I'm told that the only, the only plant, Sprague plant [coughs] that had the unions was here in North Adams. So that uh, that presumably if the other places weren't organized you'd be competing against them unless you get them organized. Was there ever any discussion of trying to figure out if other places could be organized or not?

J: Yeah. Sprague did have another facility up in Berry, Vermont, which was organized. [R: Uh huh] I believe it was an Independent Union. I think they went with the Steel Workers, United Steel Workers. I had a little bit of conversation with those people up there, because they were organized. And Walter and I talked on several occasions about getting something going to organized some of the branch plants. We never did.

R: I'm surprised that the IUE would never have taken initiative to [unclear].

J: IUE did take a couple of shots to, at some of their (--) I think they went down to Worcester. [R: Uh huh] It was just, they could never develop what they needed to get going. But they went after a plant in Texas, Wichita, Texas. [R: Uh huh] IAM went after a plant in Tennessee, but nothing ever culminated from any of those drives. And a couple of them were fairly serious.

R: I think I asked you about this the last time we met. And I was explaining to you the nature of our project. Everywhere we're uh, the Shifting Gears, The Changing Meaning of Work in Massachusetts 1920 - 1980. We have projects at six Heritage State Parks in Holyoke, Fall River, here, Lawrence, Gardner and Black Stone Valley. We're all sort of focusing on different aspects. In Gardner, furniture workers. In Holyoke, the paper mills and that sort of thing. Here, Sprague and to [unclear]. Well I'm focusing more now on Marshall Street, rather than Sprague, which means I'm also focusing on Arnold Print Works and Textile Printing and that sort of thing. Um, this is a long introduction into this. One of the things that we very much want to get at in terms of the oral history interviews that we're doing is people's perceptions about the Changing Meaning of Work. First of all, does that notion have any meaning for you at all? The idea of the changing meaning of work.

J: Yeah, yeah.

R: And what, and what (--) In 1920 and what does it mean? Do you think that the meaning of work for you, or in the last generation or two, how has the meaning of work changed? What's that about?

J: Well it's changed less for me if I understand what you're asking.

R: I'm not sure I do. That's why it's a very open ended question. [Both laugh].

J: As I understand what you're asking, it's really changed very little for me, because my job has always been a technical job. And I've always used technical equipment. I traded in my slide rule for a calculator, and I traded in my calculator for a computer kind of thing. So my tools have changed. The work really hasn't changed all that much for me. [R: Umhm] But you know, as I understand it some of the things that they told me were going to happen ten years ago was that right now there's one office type person for every ten factory type persons. And that's going to completely reverse in the next decade. And there's going to be ten people who are more technically orientated to each one person running that factory. And I guess that I've seen, I've seen that pretty well happen over at Sprague. Although I don't think that it's happened to that magnitude. But it is changing and it's changing probably more rapidly now than (--) When I say now, in the last two or three years than it's changed in the last fifty years if you will.

R: What do you think that will mean, or has meant for people's lives?

J: Well, it's meant for me (--) For example, when I first started working for Sprague Electric and somebody said we've got to produce a bulletin to get out into the field, or customers will know what's going on, it used to mean mountains and mountains and mountains of calculations. Long hand calculations done on a slide rule. And forty-eight hours a week, fifty-five hours a week, sixty-two hours a week, that was my, those were my schedule work weeks. And uh, if you can put in extra, fine, come on in, you know, because we've got these mountains and mountains. And you'd sit there and make calculations one after the other, after the other. Well today you just hit the run button and away it goes, you know.

R: And they're accurate.

J: Haha, they're absolutely accurate.

R: To a hundred decimal points. [Laughs]

J: Well the uh, the work (--) I've seen our work force change here in North Adams. And as I say, it's still changing. [R: umhm] I think that one of the mistakes that Sprague Electric is making now is, well they're owned by a holding company and they're a couple of accountants that hold a controlling interest. They're getting away from research. There's no research anymore. What the hell, research is expensive. I guess that's pretty much the thing in the whole company. Where American industry isn't willing to put out the bucks for research, let somebody else do it. Let the Japs do it. They're willing to put money out there. The problem, you know, there in lies one of our future problems, because the Japs are doing it. And they're getting into some research that we're not even thinking about. I have no idea what they're developing, but the higher resolution TV for example that you know, I don't know how many years away from that we are, but they've got it perfected. [R: Right] The reproducing equipment. [R: Right] They're, with our know how, but we're willing to (--) With our technology, but we don't have the willingness to invest the capital that it takes to put that technology to an application, or to a practical application. Sell the patents to the Japanese. And you know, those are all jobs. That's America that they're selling and trading off. [R: Right] And I'm not a Republican obviously, [R: uh huh] because I don't agree with the philosophy that I've seen. And I've learned what a conservator is in the last, in the last eight years. I always thought it was a guy that liked to preserve and take care of what we got. And that's not even close. [Laughs] So anyway uh, I think that they're, our strengths are being sold for profits, or lack of a wish to put up some funding that's going to return profits in ten years. You know.

R: What do you think of the notion, I think (--) No, I'm not going to (--) What do you think of the notion of this sort of private workmanship, or that sort of (--) Do you think that that's changed, or is that a cliché, or?

J: Well I've always pictured myself as kind of a craftsman. [R: Uh huh] If I do something, I want it to, I want to be proud of it. And it's going to be the very best I can do. No matter what I'm doing I try to (--) That's the philosophy I try to apply for my own life. But I'm seeing (--) I just (--) We signed a contract a year ago with what's left of our bargaining unit. There was about a hundred and twenty-five people left at that point in time. And I held a few meetings. I knew what our membership wanted. We had, we had some lengthy conversations. I went after exactly what they wanted and was able to deliver some of it, but the thing that amazed me is that somebody jumped up and said, "let's stop the fooling around, let's strike. And I said, "you know, the company is moving and I've got a package here that's not their final package and I told you it wasn't." "I can still work." "I move we take a strike vote," somebody hollers. And "I second that!" And I'm not done negotiating. You know I want to get to the position where I've gone as far as I feel I can go and then tell the company, you've got a problem. You know I don't want to tell them they got a problem when I still got a yard to go. And uh, "okay, let's take a strike authorization vote." Unanimous! Unanimous! Not one nay. And there's little old ladies and you know. And the people that work for Sprague Electric now have lost that pride of working for someone. They have lost, if you will, the respect for the company, because of what happened

in 1985 when the company went absolutely wild. And everybody that works there thinks that their next day is their last day. [R: Uh huh] And it's not something that they'll talk about, or they'll tell you up front, but it's something that they feel deep down inside. And even though, you know, I still respect most of the managers that I deal with. There's none down there that can say that I've ever mistreated them. And even the management feels that you know, we may walk in here tomorrow, it might be our last day. And that's just the very quiet prevailing feeling. So our (--) We had people who were very very serious and very proud of what they did. And we have people now who are not, because of what's happened, because of what they've come through. And I know I was, I was completely shocked when uh (--) [Coughs]

R: So you're still losing membership?

J: Yes, we're still, we're down to fifty-five now? Uh, I just lost a guy three weeks ago. We're down to fifty-four.

R: Uh, you've been, you've talked to me for a long time and I really appreciate all of the time you've given to me. It sounds like your voice is going.

J: [Laughs] Sometimes (--)

R: I know it can be very tiring to think about all of these things. So I don't want to go on for too much longer. There's a couple of things I want to get off the tape from you. But before I turn the tape off I wanted to basically ask if there's anything (--) Basically I'm out of questions. Is there anything that you would like to add to put on record?

J: Well I'm, I'm not sure what the controversy is, or what most people think about how Sprague came to cease its operations at the Marshall Street complex. I don't know whether that's the kind of thing you want on your tape, or not.

R: That would be fascinating!

J: But uh, well that's recent history and very easy to remember. And the way things happened, happened exactly as we knew, those of us on the inner circle of that company knew what would happen when the son took the reigns of the corporation. [R: Uh huh] When John Sprague took over as president nothing happened, because Neil Welch was sitting back there. [R: Pulling strings] The wise old fox in complete control of the company. Well the minute that Neil Welch retired and John Sprague did in fact pick up the reigns of that company was the minute that that company lost everything that it had ever made. [Chuckles] And we knew based on what we like to refer to as the [Worcester Experience], that he was not a very good manager. [R: Umhm] That maybe he's good in his field, but he sure can't manage a corporation. And we knew and I talked with top management quite freely. That it was the beginning of the end before anybody ever dreamed it was. And we made a few vain attempts to have a couple of parties. And have Mr. Sprague there and show him how everybody loved him. And we participated in the open house at Marshall Street. And we raffled off things and gave away prizes. And tried to create a pride in our job and let him know that everybody was here and we really appreciate what we've got. And he seemed, he seemed to be very acceptable to what was happening. But meanwhile

there was another guy down there in Worcester, a fellow by the name of McInnis, who I guess John Sprague hired and McInnis bailed him out of the big mess that he had created in Worcester. And this McInnis wanted to get the corporation out of North Adams for some reason or other. There is one man that hated North Adams with a passion. Absolutely hated them. And I'm talking about this McInnis character. And being that he was very very close to John Sprague, he talked John Sprague into moving down to Lexington against the strong advice of Neil Welch and crossed both the objections from Jensen, from the Board of Directors of Penn Central. [R: Umhm] And uh, that was General Cable. In fact Jensen lost his job too, because of the (--) He was tossed off, because he allowed John Sprague to go down there and put that place up in Lexington, or take over that business down there, which was the beginning of the end. And I hear a lot of things. You know, it's just absolute and pure 100% mismanagement. That's what caused the demise if you will of the Sprague presence in a big way in North Adams. In a corporate way. And in a way that used to benefit the city. And I don't believe it has anything to do with any unions, or anything else, because I found that I got along quite well with John Sprague. And I found him to be quite liberal. In fact I managed to get one of the best contracts ever. We came out with about 25% increase over a three year period, which was second to none in this country while he was at the helm. And we got along well with him, but we just lost, we lost the whole thing, because there was so much pressure for him to put on the, put on the dog. Put on the big show. Get down there in the big city where big things are happening. And you know, he was talked into going down there.

And uh, one of the other things that happened and I'm sure that knowing John Sprague, I don't really know him, but I know who he is. And I think when the mayor called him a liar publicly was when he started listening to Don McInnis. [R: Uh huh] I'm absolutely positive in my own mind that that was, it was that profound situation that that's when he really started listening to McInnis. And I think that other facts would probably prove that out. But in my own mind I think that that was critical. That put (--) [Phone rings] If nothing else it put the frosting on the cake and it finished the deal off.

R: One question occurred to me that I wanted to know. Uh, it's just a short. It's a very basically technical question. What proportion of your day, especially when the bargaining unit was larger, what proportion of your day was spent on union business?

J: Well I would say that when we were in our heyday, when we had a large membership and when we were involved in all of these community activities, probably about half of my work week was spent on union activities.

R: Did you get [unclear]? Did you get paid for it?

J: Yes. Yeah. Yeah, we had contract for provisions that uh, it took care of that. I would say close to half of my time. Probably sixteen hours out of forty. And then you know, the evenings and so on and a lot of our own time. [R: A lot of extra time] We spend a good portion of uh (--) And there was more than just myself. There was probably three or four of us who were basically involved in all of the community activities. So it amounted to a good deal of time.

R: Okay. Well that's about (--) Unless you want to add anything else that's about all I have to say.



J: [Coughs] I think we're all set.

R: Yeah. It's a very very good interview. I want to thank you very much John.

J: All right. I'm sorry I (--) You know, I got it on my calendar and I got it on my desk. [R: have you ever lost it?], And I'm leaving town tomorrow and I've got some things on my mind that I've got to do. And Tuesday I looked and said, okay. I've got (--) Tomorrow night I've got to take my kid to basketball. [Both laugh] And then I've got to meet with Gabe on Thursday. [R: Yeah] And then here comes Thursday night and I got this trip that I've got to make.

R: Where are you going?

J: Just down to Springfield, but it's a full meeting of all of the unions from the Northeast area. And we've invited a couple of prominent speakers in. So.

R: Where are you meeting?

J: Um, the [Parwick?] in Springfield. I've been using that for years and years and years. It's a little out of the main stream, but they've been treating us well. We did a good deal there and they've treated us well over the years. So.

end of interview